Civil Rights History Project
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Interviewee: Ericka C. Huggins

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Interviewer: David Cline

Videographer: John Bishop

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START OF RECORDING

F1: From the Library of Science and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

DAVID CLINE: Good morning. Today is June the 30th, 2016, and I'm here in Oakland, California, for the Civil Rights History Project of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. Behind the camera, we have John Bishop from media generation and UCLA. We're joined in the room today by Guha Shankar from the Library of Congress, and we have the distinct pleasure of sitting down for a little while with Professor Ericka Huggins. And if I could ask you-- the one time I'll push you at all, a complete sentence to introduce yourself, "My name is," or, "I am," and your name and where you were born.

ERICKA HUGGINS: My name is Ericka Cosette Huggins. I was born in Washington, DC, in 1948, and I live in Oakland, California.

DC: So what I'd like to do to start, if you could tell us a little bit about your family background. So we know where you were born, but could you tell us a little bit

about the family that you were born into and where you were raised and how you were raised and if that influenced you later in your life?

EH: I believe that everything has influenced my life, and where I was born was an initial influence. I was born in southeast Washington, DC, and in the decade that I was born it was very segregated, DC. Now, it's very gentrified, DC, but then it was very segregated, especially Southeast. My parents met each other in DC. My father grew up in Washington, in Northwest, not far from Howard University, which was a different Northwest than when they got married in the mid-[19]40s. My mother was originally from the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina. My father was one of two children. My mother was the oldest girl of 11 on a farm, a tobacco farm. Her parents were both descendants of slaves. Actually, one of--my maternal great-grandfather was a freed slave. My father's mother and father were, as we said then, Washingtonians, which meant code for free Negroes. However, none of my grandparents or my parents went beyond high school. As a matter of fact, my father finished the eighth grade, and he was a World War II veteran before he died. My mother is also gone, and my grandparents are definitely not around.

DC: Did they tell you your family's history growing up? Did you grow up with that?

EH: Some of it. My mother told me stories all the time, because I was--I still am inquisitive, but I was even more inquisitive then, so I said--I would ask her questions, because I lived in DC, not in North Carolina, although we visited every summer. My mother would say, "We're going home." Actually, those were her last words, the day before she died, "I'm going home," and I knew she meant it in a more mystical way

because she was so close to death. It was just her time to go. She was very ill, but home for her was always North Carolina even though she lived in DC, and we moved her here to California later in her life so she wasn't alone.

But she told me stories, and I can tell you any number of them, but the one that stood out to me, that's standing out to me right now, is that my grandfather, whose name was —O. C. Davis-- the father of 11, and he loved them all dearly--he had to do roll call when he took [5:00] them all in the truck anywhere and brought them back, but he loved them all. My grandmother was 5'2", and he was 6'6", 6'7", but she told me, you know, my mother was very Carolinian, very Southern. And she said, "You know, sugar, your grandfather was 75 when he died, but they called him 'boy' until that day." And I was like, "No! Why? What was wrong with them?" I'm 10 or 11, trying to figure out the cruelty of humans. That was what the conversation was about that day, why slavery, why such meanness. And she was the first person to tell me it was about money as well as race, and then, as I grew older, I got to understand that, not from school. I wasn't told--the history books had one paragraph on slavery because of the unsaid promise not to talk about race in this country, but, of course, you might have heard they did that in African-American homes. We always talked about race. We had to in order to walk out of the door and feel sane and safe out there. So when she told me that, I tried to imagine my tall, very handsome grandfather being called "boy" by boys, by little boys, by teenagers, and by grown men as well.

She told me many stories, and they helped me to understand not just the cruelty of humanity but the compassion, and, yeah, she told me a lot of stories. My father told me stories as well about the area of Washington that he grew up in, because they were near

Howard University. They had nothing to do with university people. They were just Washingtonians. But my grandfather, my paternal grandfather, Joseph Jenkins, Sr., was quite a character, and I have a really fond memory of walking into a room where he was resting in this big house he lived in. Black folks don't own these big houses anymore, by the way, in DC. It had four floors, each floor kind of small and going upward, one on top of the other, but he was on the bottom level resting because he wasn't feeling well. And I walked into the room to say, "Grandpapa, how are you?" and I looked on a little side table in that room, a tiny room just with a bed, a small bed, and there was a picture of an indigenous American, a Native American, an "Indian," as we called indigenous people when I was a little girl, in full headdress. "Who's that, Grandpapa?" And he said, "Oh, that's my great-grandfather." So all of this made me who I am, not just physically who I am but emotionally and spiritually who I am, socially as well, and, I'm sorry to say, politically. I'm not the one creating the politics around all of that, but I entered into those politics. [Break in recording.]

DC: And they insisted that you get the education that they hadn't gotten.

EH: Did they insist? No, but they said it was important that I do so. Yes. They didn't have the pressure, the awful pressure that young people have today. "You will do this. You will achieve that. You will do--" I don't have a judgment about anyone's parenting, but I do think that academic education is only part of the education. So their encouragement for me to understand history so that I could understand the present moment, so that I could have some claim to the future, was an important part of my education, but they weren't doing it to--for some reason. They were just giving [10:00] me information because I asked all of these questions. I'm the oldest of three

children in my immediate family. I have a sister in the middle and a brother who is the youngest, and we're all in California now, and that's a long story. (laughter)

DC: So just a little bit maybe about your schooling, then, and into high school.

EH: So I went to Richardson Elementary School in walking distance of my house, because children walked everywhere then and felt safe to do so. I went to Kelly Miller Junior High, which was in walking distance, a little longer walk but in walking distance, and then I was transferred to McKinley Technical High School--it's now just McKinley High School--in northwest, because my middle school counselor said that I was college material. Of course, I went home to my mother to ask, "What does that mean? What does that mean?" And she said, "Well, they want you to go to college, sugar. That's what that means." "But why did they say it like that?" I was always asking questions about the hows and the what-fors of navigating the world, and I'm glad I asked all kinds of questions, now that I look back on it, although sometimes my mother would just say, "Ericka, OK, that's enough questions for today." (laughter)

DC: It sounds like you were basically revealing the system or trying to see, "So what's in it? Why are they wording it that way?"

EH: Yeah, I was trying to understand.

DC: Yeah.

EH: I remember driving from southeast to northwest in the winter of DC, which is no joke, and we were in snow clothing, and there were chains on the wheels of my father's old Buick. And in the drive from where I lived--we lived in semi-detached houses. Do you know DC well enough to know what I'm talking about?

DC: Yeah. Yeah.

EH: OK. And then, across the street, which didn't have any housing on it, but way across the street were housing projects where really poor people of color lived. By "poor," I'm not talking about their inner wealth. I'm talking about their conditions of poverty, and it was heartbreaking. I always wanted to go do something as a child, because there were people living in their cars in the snow. I went to school with children who didn't have heat in their homes, who slept with piles of coats on top of them. I couldn't understand.

And then, this particular day that I'm remembering, being in the Buick with the chains and the snow and going to my grandmother's house in northwest on T Street, the closer I got to northwest, there are no housing projects, at least not that look like where I lived. There were no people sleeping in their cars, and my father--it was wintertime. It might have even been around Christmastime, so my father said--I think it was myself and my brother; I can't remember if my sister was with us--"Do you children want to see the store windows?" And we said, "Yes," because we were thinking of Christmas trees and lights. What I saw was happy people with big fur coats on, and their children had on real coats and real shoes, and I'm like, "OK, what goes on here?" I just had eyes to see. Nobody was in my head. Nobody was telling me how to see, and children are like that. You might know that. Children are just pure until somebody says, "Don't think that. Don't do that. Don't ask that question." Well, my parents didn't do that. Thank goodness.

So I went home, and I asked my mother, "Well, how is it that the people who live in this part of southeast have nothing, and the people that live in that part of northwest up near the Capitol Building have so much?" And she said, "Sugar, that's just the way it is."

I said, "Well, tell me, because I want to understand. It makes me cry." And she said, "Well, you know, [15:00] part of it is just bigotry." And then I had to ask her, "What does that mean?" And that was how she referred to almost everything, because she grew up in the deep Jim Crow South, and then she explained that white people have money and black people don't. I said, "Why is that?" She said, "Well, after slavery, there wasn't anything that made it any different, sugar." Now, that's really simplistic, but it's true, isn't it? And why would I not believe her? She never lied to me, but it was heart-wrenching to know the reasons why, just based on someone's paintjob, which is how I like to think of it, that, you know, you could have not or you could have. So that was my introduction to a class awareness, but it wasn't academic at all, and never did anybody in school talk to me about it. I got accused of asking too many questions at school as well. However, it wasn't loving, like when my mother said, "OK, that's enough." It was that I was impudent to questioning, to challenging, but I wasn't. I was just asking questions. I think that that prompted me to become an educator, because I know how I was treated, and I didn't want to see children in the generations below me being treated like that. It was unjust.

Part of it, I mean, I didn't have--until high school, I didn't see white students. You know, we called--when I was growing up, we called DC "Chocolate City," and it was. It's not anymore, but it was, and so I'd never been to school with white students in Washington, DC, in the [19]50s and the [19]60s until I went to high school. And I never had a white teacher. I didn't dislike it, but they were even more adamant that my questions were just not right, because of ignorance, with the black teachers as well, because of internalized racism. So I got challenged at every point, but I didn't silence

myself. I became quieter. As a matter of fact, at one point I became withdrawn, because if you cannot hear or see yourself except around the people closest to you, you don't enter into conversation, but I broke that by writing poetry when I was in middle school. That was how I dealt with it.

But my family life was not easy either. My father was an alcoholic, so when I say that my mother helped me, she did, because I went to her about everything, including his alcoholism. And it was through her that I understood it to be a disease, not a choice, you know, because my question was, "Why won't he just stop drinking?" Then, I found out later in life that there are adults that think like that. So, yeah, that--my sister, brother, and I handled all of everything with a lot of comedy and laughter. There were times when we couldn't, but we learned how to laugh, and my mother and my father enjoyed a good comedic interlude.

DC: Would you draw on all these skills later, especially when you were in the Party?

EH: Yes. When I was in high school, as a matter of fact, I surrounded myself with young women and men who loved to laugh. We'd make a joke about anything, not in an offensive way. I don't mean it like that, but we would make a joke about anything. Then, in the Party, that was how I handled all the challenges too. What do they call it? I don't like the adjective put before "humor" to describe what I'm talking about, "black humor." "Why it gotta be black?" (laughs) See what I mean? I'm laughing at it. [20:00]

DC: Right. Right. (laughs)

EH: But how did that happen? So, yeah, I still can see all of my girlfriends and young men friends right now, and they were all hysterically funny and brilliant, but not necessarily according to the Western, academic construct. They were artists. They were poets. They were dancers. They were--they could sing. They could write a song. They had acute memory and brilliant understanding of how the world works, but it was just among us. And I always wished that those young people then and the young people now had a voice, and I do hope that someday the Library of Congress just has a project that interviews young people of color, just to get them on film.

[Recording stops and restarts.]

DC: How did you end up in California, and what did you think of California from where you grew up?

EH: OK, so there's a segue--

DC: OK. Great.

EH: --that I'll tell you. So, when it was time for me to go to college, I went to Cheyney State Teachers College, which is right outside of Philly, and it was a party school, but I went there because I wanted to be a teacher. My first boyfriend in high school had a brother who was disabled. He had a degenerative illness that, though he was in his teens, he could not speak. He walked like a baby walks, and he had to be cared for, and his mother and father worked. His mother quit her job to care for him as he got older, but it was very, very difficult, because they were not wealthy people. They lived in northwest, in the northwest that I'm talking about, not the one that's in magazines, so she

put him in a home for children in Lawton [?], Maryland, and my boyfriend took me to see his brother.

I cried the whole time I was there and the whole way back, and I told him, "I'm going to become a teacher. Children shouldn't have to be in these prisons because they're disabled." And all of the people there, all the children there and teens had different disabilities, some of them cognitive, some of them physical, some of them social, and they were all together, and there was no definition between them. And there were all these caregivers that took care of them to the best of their abilities, but I don't know that they were well trained for what they were doing. Eventually, my boyfriend's brother came home to live, and he died at home because there was no cure for this illness, but that was the pivot for me. It was already the class and race, and then it was ability. Come on. And they were mostly--of course, it was a state school, so they were mostly young boys and girls of color. So I saw it all again. It wasn't like I was looking for it. It was right there, so I vowed to become a teacher.

A little later, I went to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and that was the pinnacle experience for me. If you'd like more about that, I did an interview with BBC a long time ago, and they probably still have it. You can find it if you need it. But I was standing there, and I recognized that all the speakers were men. I asked a lot of questions about that, and I found out that the women were uninvited to speak. I'm glad I didn't find that out then. I would have been so upset, but I could tell.

DC: Did you go to that with your family or with friends?

EH: No, I went on my own. I went to my mother, and I said, "I'm going to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom because I heard about it at school." I was

15. And my mother said, [25:00] "No, you're not. Go ask your father. I don't want you out there with all those people, and you'd get hurt, and the police are--no." So I asked my father, and he said, "Go ask your mother." [Laughs] So they didn't want me to go. They were afraid, and I said, "But I'm going anyway." That's how I was. "I have to go. Can I take my sister and brother?" "No, you may not." My mother later said, "Ericka was pretty quiet, and she did whatever I asked her to do until it was something she had to do, and then she did what she wanted," and that's kind of how my life looked to her. She wouldn't have chosen the Black Panther Party for me either, but I went, and it was one of the most peaceful experiences I think I've ever had. And standing there that day all by myself, 15 years old, I was standing on a mound of dirt, and I kept waiting for the speakers, and I did hear speakers. And I don't remember what they said, but finally Lena Horne came to the stage, and I just--I already knew she was an activist because my mother pointed her out to me on TV. "You children come in here. Lena Horne is--" "Mom, we're playing." "Come here. Look on the TV. Lena Horne is a Negro who cares about her people." "OK."

So when I saw Lena Horne standing on that stage, I got really quiet, and then what she did changed my life. She sang the word "freedom." She just--two syllables--sung them, and you know there were--it seemed to me like hundreds of thousands of people were there. There were thousands and thousands of people, and she sang the word "freedom." And as it exited her being and entered the air, everyone became quiet. There was, like, a blanket of silence. And then, when the words entered my ears and entered my heart, a vow arose. "I will serve people for the rest of my life." It wasn't a thought. I can't tell you how things like that arise, but it did. And I saw Rosa Parks come to the

stage and then walk away from the stage, and that's what made me wonder, "Where are the women?" And that was a beginning of an introduction into--not only to, "European Americans make the decisions," but they're primarily men. And then, the training is to be as European as possible and/or as white-male as possible in decision-making. I knew there were no white males involved in the women not speaking. I knew it was more internal than that and found out later that it was.

But I walked away feeling happy, because I saw all kinds of people from all over the country and possibly the world. I couldn't tell how global it was, but I could definitely tell there were people there from North Carolina in pickup trucks and overalls and church buses and school buses and wheelchairs and skates and bikes and old vans and every possible vehicle, and I had gotten there on two or three city buses. And I went home, and I told my mother about it, and I told her about these words that came from my heart, I said, and she was touched and was happy, of course, that I was all in one piece and nothing happened. But that was a pivotal day. So, when it was time for me to go to college at 16 and a half, to Cheyney, I wanted to be a teacher, and I wanted to serve the world, and I wanted to leave that party school, which I did, not because I didn't like to party. I loved to party, but I wasn't going to become a teacher at Cheyney. I just knew it. So I transferred to Lincoln University, and this was another turning point, because while I was there, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton were writing the book *Black Power*, and they would read to us. Isn't that amazing? They would gather anybody who wanted [30:00] to gather on a Tuesday or a Wednesday night and read from the chapters in the book. It wasn't published yet. And I learned about the right to determine one's own

destiny, which is what the book talks about. It doesn't talk about retaliation against white Americans, which is the ongoing fear. [Recording stops and restarts.]

DC: So there are some interesting things going on on Lincoln's campus in those years.

EH: Oh, my goodness.

DC: Bizarrely, I happen to know a little bit about that, but can you tell us about that and the sort of consciousness that was really starting to--

EH: Everything was moving. There was a black, socialist, communist--it didn't really matter which--organization on the campus, which I tried to join, and I knew what I was joining. I wasn't naïve about it, but they wouldn't let me join because I was a woman, because I am a woman, and then there was a black student union, which I did join, but it wasn't called the black student union then. Actually, the Black Panther Party coined the term "student union," the first of which was at San Francisco State. So it was the Black Student Congress. That's what it was called, and I joined. And while I was a member of the Black Student Congress, because it was an all-black campus--Lincoln is one of the very first, the first three historically black colleges, and there were three of them and--I didn't find this out until later--open during slavery, and Lincoln was one of them. Cheyney was another. So it wasn't like we were organizing to change overt racism, but we were working with the internalized racism of the administrators and the faculty on the campus, not to mention the sexism. I was one of the first 15 women to go to Lincoln.

DC: Oh, wow.

EH: Oh, that was very interesting, very interesting.

DC: On a campus of how many men?

EH: Hundreds, but I don't remember how many, versus 15 women. Now, of course, the students pretty much liked it, because they thought, "Oh, boy, new meat," but then we had to set lots and lots of boundaries. But I made friends. Once again, I found all the artists and the left-of-the-left kind of people to talk to, and it was OK. Those men were pretty open, except that communist organization. I don't think it had anything to do with communism. It was just them trying to maintain power, male power, which, they felt, had been taken from them throughout history. And that was where I met John Huggins, and he became my friend, and then we became lovers, and then we left in my junior year. It was his junior year, too, but he had been there less time than me.

DC: Now, were you there when they were picketing--there were pickets of the health services and a number of demonstrations.

EH: I was there--I don't remember that. I was there [19]66, [19]67. I left Cheyney in my sophomore year and went to Lincoln, and then, in the middle of my junior year, I left with John to drive across the country to find the Black Panther Party, but we were always picketing something. And while being in the Black Student Congress and taking a full load of classes, I also tutored children in English in the nearby village. It was called Lincoln Village, and I noticed that the conditions of poverty in Lincoln Village were just like southeast Washington, like Harlem, like parts of Delaware I had visited, North Carolina. There wasn't any difference, and something started to dawn on me. It doesn't matter whether you live urban or rural; the poverty has the same impact on education, the educational resources, the facilities, [35:00] all of the teachers, everything.

So I was piecing together slowly but surely an understanding of systemic inequity. I wouldn't have called it that then.

DC: Right, but you'd been piecing that together since you were a little kid.

EH: Yes, I had been. I was also piecing together my own spiritual understanding, because what was upsetting to me is that we're all humans. That's what was upsetting. There was no not-humans.

DC: So why are we treating each other like this?

EH: Right. It's a basic question. All children have this question, and then teenagers lose the questioning when people tell them, "That's a dumb question," or, "don't ask that question," or, "this is not the place for a question." And I'm not just talking about African American people. I'm talking about all students. This is unfair to every single young person not to tell the true history of a place, not so that you can wallow in it, just so you have it. So when I was tutoring those children, I said, "You know, something is really, really wrong that needs to be changed at a different level." I didn't know what. I didn't understand structural, systemic in my mind yet, but I knew it was bigger than DC, Harlem, or Lincoln Village. I just knew, not only that. There were lots of organizations on that campus including the Deacons for Defense. I won't describe them. If you don't know who they are, there's the internet.

DC: (laughs) But they had a presence at Lincoln.

EH: Oh, yeah, they did. They were the ones who pointed out that right nearby was--Maryland sort of is bigger than we think and surrounds, so, anyway, I found out at Lincoln--somebody mentioned to me at Cheyney that the Ku Klux Klan had quite the presence in that area. As a matter of fact, the Klan's main headquarters were in Rising

Sun, Maryland. But I remember standing on the Lincoln campus, and one of my friends in Deacons for Defense--and they weren't well-known on campus because they were a little bit clandestine, just a little bit--but they pointed, "Ericka, look." And we looked across the road, and there were crosses burned for Lincoln students. And I'm remembering right now what J. Edgar Hoover said in his mission statement of the counterintelligence program, that, "We want to discredit, minimize, and neutralize the black liberation movement with a specific focus on students." And, of course, I didn't know that then. There would be no way to know it. COINTELPRO didn't even have a name then, but systemic, and the organizations like the Klan and the Birchers and the White Citizens' Council, all of those, I knew in the South. I was amazed they were up South in this way in Philly, you know, and the Pennsylvania countryside, and nobody stopped it, yet, thinking back to DC, there was always a police presence in my neighborhood.

My sister and I would yell at the police all the time. "Don't hit that man. He didn't do anything. Don't do that!" My sister was louder than me. I would ask questions, and she would just yell, and people would gather, and the police would be forced to arrest a person or leave them alone. But I don't know why they didn't turn on us. We didn't--you know, youth has its own strength, and I think youth has its own angels, but we were doing the thing that seemed right. However, you know, all of the police, law enforcement, the courts, the FBI, and other intelligence entities, as I got to be older and a little bit more [40:00] aware of the structures I've been talking about, I could see that there was a concerted effort, that the police were given the power to do what they did. It wasn't like it was an arbitrary one mean police officer. That's what I thought as a

little girl. It wasn't that the Klan just chose Lincoln University. This overarching system of cruelty let them know without telling them directly, "It's OK for you to burn crosses. Go right ahead. Have fun." So, yeah, a lot was moving. A lot was moving, and it was on the Lincoln campus that--in the student union building--that I found out about the Black Panther party in a *Ramparts Magazine* article written by Eldridge Cleaver about the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which was its first name, and the jailing of Huey P. Newton. So that was what made me want to leave campus--there were some other reasons, too, but want to leave campus and drive across the country and join the Black Panther Party. That was November of 1967.

I waited for him in the student union building that day and gave him the raggedy *Ramparts Magazine*, because whenever we would get one--it was a full magazine, a glossy magazine, but it would get passed hand to hand, so the cover was falling off, and everybody was so amazed by, "Who's Huey P. Newton? Whoa, what's he doing?" And Bobby Seale. I wasn't as impressed by Eldridge, but I thought Bobby and Huey were speaking to my need to understand systemic inequity or, as I called it, the oppressive forces wherever they are. And something in that article Eldridge wrote explained, all power to all the people, and that did it. So I waited for John. John read it, and we just looked at each other. We were really quiet. We just looked at each other, and we knew something, but we didn't put words to it. And then, later, in a Swahili class being taught by a German guy with red hair and bright freckles with a German accent, that's like, "OK, this is a cartoon. Where am I? Where am I? What am I doing here?" (laughs) It was one of those--you know, those moments where you're like, "OK. Did I land here intentionally?" [Laughter] Nobody else seemed to be experiencing what I was

experiencing, but then I made a choice, and I wrote a little note to John, "I'm going to California. Can you come with me?" And he wrote back, "Yeah."

He had been in the Philippines on a Navy ship, and he was there during the time or after the time the church got bombed in Birmingham, and he stayed, and then he--there wasn't a particular war, but he was just in the Navy, having left where he grew up, New Haven, Connecticut. Having left that whole scene, the armed services were a way of getting out of dodge, and that's kind of what he did, but while the same kind of prompting from within was happening for him. He's a very kind and compassionate person, and he saw the same level of poverty in the Pacific Rim that we all knew here, so we did it. We drove across the country. We landed in Los Angeles and started looking for the Black Panther Party. We found the Black Panther Party and joined the Los Angeles chapter.

DC: So how and where did you find the party? Do you have a memory of that?

EH: Yeah, in South Central Los Angeles at a building called the Black Congress Building. It was a building that rented spaces to community organizations, and this will come in handy later, but three doors from the Black Panther Party office was the US Organization office, so we were all friends. [45:00] COINTELPRO, and taxpayers--my mother's and father's taxes paid for COINTELPRO.

DC: To mess with you.

EH: Well, to mess with everybody and to destroy whole families and so on. Anyway, so we walked in that office, and a young man in the office said--we were all young. I was 18. John was 21, 22. I can't remember. When he was assassinated, he was 23. And we walked into the office, and I said, "We want to join the Black Panther

Party." "Can you answer phones?" "Yes." "Can you take messages?" "Yes." "Can you--" this is to both of us. "Can you cook a meal if it's necessary?" "Yeah." "Can you sell the Party newspaper?" "Yes." It was 25 cents at that time. "OK, y'all can join." (laughter) That was it. That was it, and we did everything, and John quickly became friends with Bunchy Carter once he was released from prison, where he had shifted his entire understanding while incarcerated from being the leader of a famous gang called the Slausons to an African and African American history master. So they became friends, and I met all of the people who became my friends later, like Norma and Elaine Brown and Phyllis Jackson, and I met--well, I met Phyllis up here in Northern California, because she was from the Pacific Northwest, but I made lifelong friends there. Well, I thought they would be lifelong friends. Many of them are gone, but we did incredible work. We didn't have any appreciation for the work that we were doing at that time, so that's why I'm saying it now. We had no--we just--nothing was ever enough.

DC: How many folks were involved at that point, when you were there?

EH: In the LA chapter?

DC: Yeah, in the LA chapter.

EH: I don't know, 50, 60.

DC: OK. Yeah.

EH: I don't quite remember.

DC: And what were the first things--so you mentioned the newspaper, but what were some of the other programs that you got put on?

EH: We spoke. We went anywhere we were asked to speak, a high school, a college class, rich Hollywood people. That was a lot of fun, especially because at some

point, when I was pregnant, we didn't have a lot of food, so the rich Hollywood houses always had a spread. (laughter) And I would just stand there and eat everything. It was fun. No, but there were really wonderful people that wanted to hear us and wanted to provide resources, their own human resources. I'm joking about the wealthy actors and actresses, but I'm not really joking about the level of generosity and care and kindness they showed. They really were our friends, and there was--actually, there was an organization called the Friends of the Panthers, and they were primarily white, conscious, and well-connected people. That was how I got a baby crib for the baby. They brought one to the--I couldn't have afforded it. Party members--oh, you should know this--party members didn't collect a paycheck. There was no such thing. We didn't get paid for anything. We lived collectively. We just were serving the people body and soul, our motto.

So the breakfast programs were running, and there were other community education programs running in Los Angeles, but it wasn't until I got to northern California when I was more involved in the survi--the community survival programs, we called them, that were service-to-people programs, like the People's Free Medical Clinics and the ambulance program. I'm sure that Norma Armour told you about the clinics and the ambulances. Did she tell you about the book that--you should know about this book in case you want to refer back. Norma is interviewed in this book. There's a book that Professor Alondra Nelson at Columbia University wrote called *Body and Soul*, and the whole book is about the [50:00] People's Free Medical Clinics. I love the book.

DC: Yeah.

EH: So, anyway, yeah, Norma's husband Al was a good friend of John's. Al was going to UCLA. Somehow, John and Bunchy found out, because there was something called the High Potential Program there that students of color, black and brown, could get the support they needed, matriculating that pretty much all-white UCLA campus, and this was during the time when Affirmative Action was not considered racist. [Laughs] I told you I love to laugh.

DC: You have to laugh.

EH: Yeah, it's historical amnesia, right? I read a story of the first UCLA medical student who had to sit in a room outside the classroom the size of a closet, smaller than that bathroom, in order to learn, and he had almost a 4.0 and high test scores when he came in, but he did it, and he's revered to this day. Anyway, so it was through Al and some other students at UCLA that John and Bunchy found out that if they enrolled at UCLA they could get financial support, and they could get support as students, and they could support the students. That was why they did it. They wanted to support the black students on campus, and that's the beginning of another story.

DC: And when did you and John get married?

EH: In Los Angeles, it was still 1967, but I don't remember the month right now. I don't know why I don't remember the month. My daughter was born--our daughter--I have to catch myself, because I've been a single mom all of her life. She was born in December of [19]68, so John got to spend three weeks with her before he was assassinated, but it was a precious three weeks. Yeah. So, yeah, it was Bunchy who first let us know that he understood the FBI was after everybody and pitting the US Organization and the Black Panther party against one another. We didn't know anything

about their organization within the organization at that time. We just knew it was them. So there was back and forth conversation with the US Organization about this, because they were also being pushed. It was happening, like, to create a shift.

DC: I've seen some of the cartoons that were being written and sent. There were plants and messages sent.

EH: Bunchy came to the office with a letter and some cartoons, and, because he was so stern--and he wasn't ordinarily stern, but he was stern that day--we didn't laugh out loud. No self-respecting person of color would have drawn those cartoons or the bubbles that came out of the mouths. Those weren't--that was pure racism. I don't know. I don't need to describe it. So, yeah, so much went on in that short while from November [19]67 to January [19]69. It felt like years and years and years went by. I'm writing about it now to make sure that it gets remembered, that I'm remembering it, at least, but we did so many things in a short period of time and so much great work, and we worked with the students, John and Bunchy. I say "we" because I felt like I was on the campus, too, though I wasn't, but we did wonderful work with the students on campus to make the High Potential Program even more--an even greater resource than it was intended to be. It now exists in another form. It's called the Academic Advancement Program at UCLA.

DC: That still exists?

EH: Uh-huh. By the way, on the UCLA campus there is a stone that memorializes John and Bunchy at Campbell Hall, where they were killed. And the students, every year the students at UCLA, black students and associated students, have a

memorial program. It's usually educational, and it has a different [55:00] focus and theme every year.

DC: I was asking about that day. You were at home with--

EH: Yeah. Ordinarily, I did party work, but right up until--almost until the baby was born. But in those three weeks after she was born, I was with her, so my routine was to get up, open the front curtains--I'd already fed her by that time--feed myself, and there was a party member assigned to stay there, because--I didn't mention this, but we were always in fear of our lives. We were followed by the police and the FBI. Our phones were bugged. They would leave signs on our cars or the front doors of our homes, just pure harassment. Stalking is a better way to describe it. We were stalked by the FBI, so that was--we lived in the conditions of war, it felt, because by that time already at least six members of the party in Los Angeles had been killed. I told you a lot went on in that short while before John and Bunchy were killed. So that day, I opened the curtains, and I was about to walk away from the window--it was a big window. It was an old apartment building, like a two-story--kind of like a townhouse. There was an apartment downstairs, and there was a stairway that came up to our apartment, and a bunch of us lived there. And a man who I'll love for the rest of my life, Long John, was with me, and I see him every year at the memorial for John and Bunchy. And I go, "Long John, come over here and look out the window," and he looked, and he said, "Hm. That house didn't have a fumigation tarp on it yesterday." And I go, "No, it didn't. What do you think that is, Long John?" And he said, "Comrade, let me--" we all called each other "comrade." "Let me go check." And he did go check, but he never returned until later that afternoon, when he was spread-eagled on the ground in front of the apartment.

So let me go back to the window. So I kept the shades opened and, in the back of the head, was thinking, "Long John will come back and tell me what's up." And I was with the baby. And a couple of hours later, I got a phone call. I have to say there were no cell phones. It was landline to landline, and there were no computers. So a man from the party office called me and said, "Comrade," and I said, "Yeah, how are you doing?" because I knew who it was. And he said--he was silent, and my heart just felt like it went into my throat. Just intuitively, I knew what he wanted to tell me. He said, "Well, two brothers were killed on the UCLA campus. I just want you to know." And I said--no, "Two brothers were shot on the UCLA campus. I want you to know." And I said, after a long pause, "Are they dead?" And he said, "Yes, sister, they're dead." And then, we were silent a really long time, and I said, "OK, goodbye." He said, "All right then," and his voice was choked. And we hung up the phone, and I looked at the baby, and I didn't have any sense of myself. It was like the baby, John, Bunchy, I kept thinking. And then, I began to think about all the party members who were on campus that day, because there had been a big meeting, which had been set up a long time before that, and the powers that be, [1:00:00] FBI and maybe other entities, had orchestrated it so that they would be killed, John and Bunchy would be killed, by someone who ostensibly was in the US Organization right after that meeting. It was about the choosing of a coordinator for the High Potential Program. That's what it was ostensibly about, so the way the FBI did things was that they created this animosity, and they filled our organizations, all of them, not just the Black Panther Party and the US Organization, every student organization, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, which was what it was called at that time, all the Latino, Asian, and Native movements, the anti-war movement, all of them--

this is history--were filled with FBI operatives and informants who tended to look like, talk like, be like the people in that organization. But we knew by that morning when I opened the curtains. We knew what they were doing. We didn't know the name COINTELPRO, but we knew what they were doing by then, because so much death had already occurred and because the movement was really global and very much coalition-based, so we were--the Black Panther party was friends with everyone. And I want to just say, to break this wrong understanding that we were a nationalist hate group, never, ever, ever were we nationalists in any kind of way. We were internationalists. Then, Huey named us "intercommunalists." He coined that term, and you can read about that later.

So that day, sort of a confrontation occurred, which was orchestrated. I now know that from all the people who were there. We pieced the stories together. And since that time, also, the FBI did make some kind of minimal statement about their involvement that day. So I started to think practically. I was feeling very wounded, but I knew that I didn't have time to cry, and I had to think about the baby, and I knew the police would come. I just knew they would come. What had I done? Nothing, but do you have to do something for the police to come? No, not if you are in this kind of body, and, not only that, I was in the Black Panther Party. So I knew also that my friends would come from campus, Elaine and Joan and Geronimo Pratt and others, and they did, and they were all somber, and none of them were naturally somber, not one of them. And we just started packing up the house, because without saying any words we knew the police would come. The fumigation tarp across the street, that was one thing I told them, and there was just too much--you know, in northern California you get used to

earthquake weather. It's too quiet. There's no air moving. It felt like that, you know. Something was about to happen.

So we were pulling everything together to leave in the car that they'd come from the campus in, and then the door was kicked open downstairs, and I couldn't see everything, but I glanced out the window, and I could see police cars and trucks and motorcycles everywhere. And the door was kicked open, and I moved really quickly to one of the bedrooms with the baby, and I wrapped her in this big coat that I'd brought with me from the East Coast, and I slid her under the bed, because I thought, "I'm going to die, but she won't. Somebody will find her." And for a split second, I was about to cry, thinking about losing my daughter, but I didn't have time, so I just kept moving. And the police were everywhere, and they were yelling, and they said--[1:05:00] they were just yelling, obscenities as well as, "Come down with your hands up." And everybody had left the upstairs, and I took a risk. There was a police officer at the bottom of the stairs who was crazy out of his mind. He was waving his gun and just--nobody crazy should have a gun. He was crazy. They were all in uniform, although there were some unmarked cars out there. Do we need to pause because of the bird? And I took a risk, and I said--I'm still up there. I didn't go down because of the baby, and I said, "I have--" and standing next to the crazy guy was a more sane police officer who was essentially focusing his attention on the crazy guy to keep him from shooting somebody. Thank goodness. So the risk I took was to speak to the sane police officer. "I have a baby here. I want to come down, and I don't want her harmed." And the crazy guy said some ridiculous something, and he said, "Shut up." The other one said, "Shut up. Get the baby and come down." So I did.

I took her out of the coat, I held her close, and I walked down. She was in a--it was LA warm. You know, it was January 17th, so it wasn't, like, summer, but it was warm, and she had on a onesie, so it was obvious that there was nothing that could be hidden, and Crazy Guy asked to check her for guns, and I just stared at him, and I said, "No." The sane guy is still trailing him. "Go over there somewhere," and I just held the baby, and Crazy Guy came back and said, "By law, we have to check her." So I just held her closer to me under her little arms so that he could see there was nothing to check, and he stopped. And then, I saw Long John on the ground on his belly with his hands cuffed behind his back with a police officer standing over him, and there were many men. All the men were spread-eagled, stomach-down, and all the women were handcuffed. And then, I was handcuffed in front so that I could hold the baby, and we were all taken away in cars to the notorious 77th Street police precinct station. The community grapevine is that if you went in there you didn't come out. That was just about right.

However, we did leave there, and we were sent to men and women's holding facilities, jails, respectively. And what were we charged with? Malicious mischief. They just wanted us off the streets. They felt--they considered us--I don't know if they considered us like a modern-day slave rebellion or a gang or a threat to the United States government, all of the above. I don't really want to unpack that psychology right now, but it was craziness, and they were quite cruel, although they didn't physically harm us. I'm grateful for that, but they were cruel. They had me in a special car because I had the baby, and they had a woman police officer, who was quite kind, sitting next to me. She never uttered a word. She never stood up to the driver or the one in the passenger seat in the front, but she was kind to me.

DC: Were all the police officers Anglo, or were there some of color?

EH: There were some that weren't, but the ones who were craziest were white. That's my memories, and I don't think I'm making that up, but they were pretty much a white group. But again, going back to systemic oppressive forces, they were trained that way, and then, since the FBI was involved, they had a double-OK to just, "Kill them if [1:10:00] they move," so we were very careful. So they stopped on the way to 77th Street Police Precinct at the morgue. They didn't have to. They didn't want me to identify John's body. They stopped. "We're at the morgue, Huggins. We want to see if they're really dead." I just fell silent, and the woman police officer looked at me like--but she didn't speak up, and, again, I was aware of everyone's location and what was OK for anyone to say and what wasn't. I was really aware of it, but my focus was the baby, and I just refused to give any words or emotion to anything. (birds squawking) Those birds are having a good time.

DC: Are those sparrows? Can we--?

EH: I don't know what they're doing. Do you want to close the door?

[Recording stops and restarts.]

EH: So I never cried. At the 77th Street police precinct station we saw men in dashikis--you know what a dashiki is--beautiful African shirts with bald heads, and they looked familiar to me. The US Organization members all had bald heads, the women and men, but two young African American men in dashikis came in, and I thought they were coming to check on us or something, because I didn't get the import, exactly, of all that

was--all the connections and payoffs or whatever were happening. And they came in, and I saw them. I was sitting with the baby. I was breastfeeding, and I saw them walk by the counter, because they had us--they were holding us in an area, in an--I don't know--like, an intake area. That's the best way to describe it, and they walked past the front desk and slapped hands with the police. I'm like, "Oh, did I just--I didn't see that, because if I tell myself I saw that I'm going to cry, so I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to let them see me cry." And then, as I was breastfeeding, a police officer came by and said, "Huggins, what are you doing there, Huggins?" And I didn't say anything, and he said, "You don't have any right to raise a baby." And I didn't say anything. I said to another police officer shortly after that, "Could I go to a more private place to feed my daughter?" He said, "Huggins, you should have thought about that before you fucked." And I thought, "Who are these people?" And I could hear my mother's words. "Well, sugar, they just don't have any home training," and that made me kind of smile to myself, because it was true. They couldn't have possibly had a mother who--I couldn't even finish the sentence for myself, nor can I now. There was a sign in the 77th Street police precinct station. You know those old felt signs with slots in them, and you put little plastic white letters in it. Churches used to have them. Theaters used to have them.

DC: Diners and--yeah. Yeah.

EH: Diners, for the menu. This one said, "Panthers, 0. Pigs, 11." And I was just so amazed. I was just so amazed at how they could get away with it all, because we weren't living in the Jim Crow South. We weren't living in the times of active slavery, and, of course, I know how they can get away with it, because the entire government cosigned the behavior and the thinking and the institutions that further all of this. So,

eventually, I was able to make a phone call, and I called the head of the Black Congress building, because I didn't know what was going to happen for me. Even though it was a ridiculous charge, malicious mischief, I never knew how anything was going to happen in the Black Panther Party, and I wanted my daughter safe. So Walter Bremond, [1:15:00] the head of the Black Congress building, came and took my daughter home, and he said he would call John's parents, because I was only able to make one call, and everything I was doing was about the baby. And he said he would call them, because I wasn't sure what the police were going to do, and let them know that he had the baby, and he said, "I'm sure you'll be released on bail. These are ridiculous charges, from what I can find out. They just want you out of the way for now."

And they took us to the women's prison for holding and the men's prison for holding. And when I was in that small cell, that was a--let me describe the cell. We were all separated and put in cells, and the cell that I was in was double-bunk, so that's four beds, with two pallets or little mats on the floor underneath these high bunks, so that was--that's the US correctional system. What are we correcting? So I saw that, and I was amazed that the women who were in there, the five of them already there, could matriculate that space. Of course, they did, and I took the sixth spot, which was a mat on the floor, and this sweet person came over to me. She was young like myself, and she had a very sweet face, and she said--I don't care why she was there. I don't care why anybody was there. Leave it to me, all the prison's doors would be opened, and the whole thing would be abolished, and someday it will, I hope. But she came to me, and she said, "Girl, what are you doing here?" And that was when I cried. And she sat there and held my hand for the longest time as I cried. She didn't move. She didn't take her

gaze off of me. She didn't ask me questions. She didn't get up and go, "That's too much." She just was right there, and I don't remember if it was the next morning or early in daylight. I think it was the middle of the night, but it could be that it was just 11:00 or 12:00, but it felt later. It could have been 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Someone came to the cell and said, "Huggins, you're released on bail."

All the charges were dropped, by the way. Obviously that would happen, and when I walked out I saw John's sister--John's sister's husband at the time, my brother-in-law, had come to get me and the baby. John's body had already been transported to New Haven, Connecticut, and we were to take a train across the country. I didn't let you know that when I got to Los Angeles after a few months--I want to say this because it's so important to me--that that was when I met Angela Davis as well. She's a dear friend of mine, and here's why she's a dear to me. So when we walked out in the dark of night, my brother-in-law and me, to go and get the baby and get on a train to travel across the country to Connecticut, I saw two people standing in the dark, and they were my friends Angela Davis and Fannie Haughton, just standing there. It gave me hope. It made me recognize that, at some point in the future of this world, right and justice would be affirmed. They didn't say anything. I didn't have words anyway, so even if they had said something to me I wouldn't have been able to respond. I was in a particular indrawn state, but they nodded. I've never forgotten that. That was such [1:20:00] the epitome of being an ally. You just show up with your heart leading, and that's how they were.

DC: Have you ever had occasion to talk to them about it?

EH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I see Angela often enough that I've told her how that felt to me many times. As a matter of fact--well, yes, in answer to your question, we don't

have all day--yes, and Fannie now is in Atlanta, Georgia, but Angela lives in Oakland. So, yeah, you know, we have all these cerebral understandings of activism and allies and doing social justice work these days, and I just want to say that people show up. That's it. An activist is really a person who's active in every part of their being. They're awake. They're conscious. They're not operating out of one emotion or the other. They're just present with everything that's going on in the world, and that's what they symbolized to me that day. They had to get out of bed to come to that faraway women's prison to see me as I was leaving. They didn't say, "You know what? I've got work in the morning," or, "I'll be leaving my boyfriend in the bed or my girlfriend in the bed. Oh, no, I'll check in." None of that is how we were. We were just right there. So, yeah, there are so many pieces of this story that are still not raw but tender, depending upon the day, the time. So I got--you know, I did take the train with the baby, and I'm so glad we were on a train and not a flight, because it gave me time to be with myself and the baby. And when I got to New Haven, Connecticut, that was a whole new chapter.

So when I reached the Huggins home, John's mother ran out and grabbed the baby as if she were holding onto her son, and she was in some way. And it was a very poignant moment for me, because I was a mother, too, and I couldn't imagine losing a child. I can't, still, imagine losing a child. There's something so--I don't want to say "unnatural," because it happens often, so it has to be natural, but something so counterintuitive and heartbreaking. So I was glad I was there, and the whole family was in grief. So, at some point after the funeral--simultaneous funerals were happening, one for John in New Haven, Connecticut, and one in Los Angeles for Bunchy Carter, and Bunchy was one of seven children, and he was the youngest, so his mother--I don't know

that she ever recovered from losing Bunchy. I don't know that John's mother ever did. I don't know how you do that. It gets better, and you move on, and I'm thinking right now of all the mothers who have lost their sons and daughters to police violence today. That's what I want to talk about before I finish.

So I went in, and I stayed at their home, and at some point really, really soon after the funeral, I was asked by Yale students and part of the New Haven black community to stay and open a chapter of the Black Panther Party, because I was going to go back to Oakland with the baby eventually. [1:25:00] So I decided to stay, not on my own. I talked with the national headquarters of the party to let them know, and the People's Free Medical Clinic was created there, Breakfast Program, lots of other smaller programs but very rooted in the New Haven black community. I think when people of New Haven they think of Yale. Let me be real. The black and brown communities in New Haven really live in conditions of poverty, and, you know, we have these ideas about our country that aren't in keeping with reality quite often. Once you enter a city, the public transportation will probably take you to these places and not those places, like BART in the Bay Area. It crosses over all of West Oakland and East Oakland, as an example.

So I really liked being in New Haven. I felt that I was keeping John's legacy alive, because he was such an activist in New Haven before he ever went into the Armed Services and then joined the Black Panther Party. So, within three months, I was separated from my daughter, arrested for conspiracy with the intent to commit murder, again, FBI-orchestrated. I didn't murder anybody. I was arrested with Bobby Seale and 12 other people, and none of us conspired to murder anybody. However, a young African American man who was a member of the Black Panther Party at the time was killed, and

I want to say that there isn't a day that goes by that I do not remember him. There isn't--I have finally forgiven myself for not stopping time, jumping in, and saving his life. I had to forgive myself, because I don't know how I would have done it, understanding that it was FBI-orchestrated, and the operative they used was psychotic and sadistic. And all that came out in the trial, hilariously so at one point, and most of the time it was very challenging. And Bobby Seale was kept in isolation, and after the younger women who were under 18--because the party drew members that were 16, 17 years old, so everybody under 18 was released. That was three people, and then the rest of all the people other than the person who pulled the trigger--and that was constructed by the FBI operative, but everybody was released, and Bobby and I stood trial together, but with none of the other people who were originally arrested. And the thinking was that Bobby had okayed this to happen. He had not, and the same was true for me. I had not. So we were both in isolation, and at one point I was in solitary confinement. Now, you have to understand how prisons are--the categories, you know, people who--I know you understand death row, but then there's administrative segregation, where people are kept in isolation because they have a mental disease or they're not safe around others or they could bring harm to themselves. This was not true of Niantic Prison for Women. I was in a prison this time, awaiting trial. I awaited trial 14 months. I was on trial for six months. The jury was history-making. The jury voir dire took three months because of the bias, and some of that was really funny, the answers to questions that the lawyers posed, and I had really wonderful--we had really wonderful lawyers, Charlie Garry, who--what a dear heart--and Catherine Roraback. Catherine is local, and Charlie was the party's lawyer. So the trial was unbelievable, and, of course, you might know this history, that Kingman

Brewster, who was the president of Yale at the time, came out and put the trial down, and he got all kinds of pushback, but he was brave. It was a ridiculous trial. It was a witch-hunt. Yes, it was a witch-hunt. [1:30:00]

So, during this time that Bobby and I were on trial, our lives were in danger. By that, I mean that they wanted us to stay imprisoned for the rest of our lives, so there was this rallying cry across the country and across the globe, "Free Bobby," and then, a little later, "Free Ericka," and then, "Free Bobby and Ericka." Eventually, the jury found no evidence to prove that we were guilty, but the jury hung. I found out later why. There was this young intransigent white working-class guy who kept saying, even though the judge's instructions were different, "They must have done it because they're here." And it was one of our women jurors that told--the jury didn't have any people of color on it, but there were six women on that jury, and I think that made a difference. One of the women told us that she threatened to hit him with a chair, and he still wouldn't listen, [laughter] because he kept hanging the jury. The jury was hung 11 to 1, and the judge sent them back. They came back again with it hung, and the judge said, "I'm not taking Connecticut taxpayers or these defendants through this one more time. You're released. You're free to go." I was so surprised. And the day that I walked out into the sun, it was Elbert "Big Man" Howard who walked with me, so he's dear to my heart. He knows it too. I tell him every time I can tell him. There are pictures of that moment, actually, and I had no idea I'd ever be released from prison. And what I want to say about that time that I spent in isolation and then in solitary confinement, and then, eventually, Angela Davis's lawyers in New York went to the state of New York to say that solitary confinement for Angela Davis is cruel and unusual punishment, and our lawyers a month

later did the same thing, "Solitary confinement for Ericka Huggins is cruel and unusual punishment," and I was released into the mainstream. So I made friends inside the prison.

DC: And how did they respond to you?

EH: They'd already been responding. They were told that if they ever talked to me or passed a note to me they would go to the hold, which is just like it sounds, and they did it anyway. They always were in contact with me, but when I was free--I've never been hugged so much, and the love among people in prison is particular. It's very--I don't want to say it's based on any negative feeling about a common enemy, because that's what people think, but really it is the support of slaves, one for another. I want to call it that. I've never called it that before, but that's what it is. The prison industrial complex is based in the plantation ideology. I left that day, but my heart didn't leave, so I always figured out ways to go back and give to incarcerated people. During the time that I was incarcerated, I taught myself to meditate. That is what kept me sane and still does. I meditate every day, and I started there, and it was Charlie Garry that brought me a book that helped me to understand how simple it was. And the reason I wanted to do it is because I couldn't bear seeing my daughter only for one hour on a Saturday. I didn't want to see her. I thought, "I can't do this. I have to see her. How am I going to do it? What is it that's going to help me?" And then, it dawned on me that I could sit quietly, and I'd always been attracted to meditation anyway. And I asked Charlie to get me a book, and he did, Charlie, who did a headstand [1:35:00] before he entered any courtroom in the morning, not where people could see him, but he was, stage-wise, capable of doing that, but he did it for himself. So he was the coolest of human beings.

Anyway, so I had a regular practice, and that was what got me through that six-month trial and has gotten me through many challenges in my life since then. This year is challenging. The fiftieth anniversary of the Black Panther Party is a challenging year. Part of it is funny, that we were so infamous, and now we're so famous. (laughter)

DC: Yeah.

EH: It's ironic and paradoxical, and it shows a whimsical nature of human behavior. We just love, love, love the Civil Rights and Human Rights Movements, but we didn't really, and we don't really. If it's containable and well behaved, we're OK with it.

DC: Cleaned up.

EH: Yeah. I remember when Martin Luther King started talking about ending the war in Vietnam and the redistribution of the wealth. Somebody somewhere said, "Oh, now, the boy can't talk like that. We're going to have to do something here." But that's what he'd always been saying. He had just gotten more adamant about it. Again, he wasn't just for black people, so there's an idea that if a person of color is saying something they're saying it because they are a person of color. That's such a ridiculous idea. White people talk all the time, and it's not because they're white. It's because they're considered human, and whiteness is not only privilege but property. There's equity in it. So, anyway, I returned--I was reunited with my daughter, who was two and a half by that time, and I had lost all of those months and precious moments with her. So there's a way in which we're like older sister, little sister, and we're still working that, because even though I didn't intend for her to be abandoned, nor did John, we were both gone. No matter which way you turn it, she was abandoned, and then I continued to do

my party work, so I wasn't with her in the way that, looking back at it now, I wish I had been, but it wasn't my life. It was the life that I had and one that some people would say I chose, but it was something in my destiny that had all of these things unfold, all of them. So I continued to do not Party work, because there is no more Black Panther Party, but I continued to serve people.

DC: Can I ask about one thing in particular, though, before we leave?

EH: Yes.

DC: [Inaudible], which is if you could talk about the school.

EH: Yes. I was going to say that there is a--the Party created all kinds of amazing community programs. The flagship of community programs was the open community school. We had something we called the Children's House in the early, early [19]70s, and then we moved to a big house in the Fruitvale of Oakland. It took place in Oakland. There was no other school like Oakland Community School that the party ran. There were afterschool programs, before-school programs, liberation schools, but this was specific to the party's national headquarters, and the next iteration was the Intercommunal Youth Institute. And then, one of the grandmothers came to Huey and said, "We should have a dedicated school site, and we should change its name so people can know what it is." And Huey gathered a group of allies together and formed the Educational Opportunities Corporation, and [1:40:00] the school was bought, a building at 61st and East 14th Street that's now International Boulevard. As a matter of fact, an article just came out about this, about making that building a landmark. The article is written by Pendarvis Harshaw.

DC: OK.

EH: I just read it yesterday. He interviewed me for it. It's a beautiful article. But the school was for two-and-a-half to 12-year-old children. It was community-based in East Oakland. It was tuition-free. It was child-centered. It had the quality of private school but the openheartedness of a public school. As a matter of fact, teachers gave up their jobs in Oakland Unified, Berkeley Unified, and San Francisco Unified to come and teach at the school. New teachers who had just finished their training would come there as interns to learn. It was a beautiful place. People came from all over the world to see the school and to replicate it in their own places. And, by the way, I didn't mention that the Black Panther Party had chapters all over the world, in South America, in Asia, particularly in South Asia, and in the Pacific Rim, and there's a film called *The Polynesian Panthers*, and it talks about how in Auckland, New Zealand, the party chapter started. At any rate, back to this, the Oakland Community School gave the children there a global education. Oh, I forgot to say one thing, and that is that parents were warmly invited to be there, to help out in classrooms. They were not considered an enemy. The public school systems have, in the past, set it up like that and might still do that.

So it was one of those high points of my life. I was director of that school for nine and a half years, and then when I left, when the party was--the school was still intact. All the other Party programs were on the back burner, and the party was falling apart. I left in 1981, and then the Party ended--unofficially, but it ended in 1982. So I still see those young people. Of course, I see my daughter and my son, who were raised in that school, but I see the young people who went to that school often enough, and they always say that it made them the people that they are, and it's very inspiring and touching. And they're doing wonderful work all over the world.

DC: Were those students encouraged to question in the way that you had not been?

EH: Yes. Our motto was to--one of our principles was to teach children how to think, not what to think. So we called it--because we were all studying philosophies from all over the world, we called it dialectical materialism, but now the running thing is "critical thinking," but it's a watered-down version of how to think. And it was very important, and we always--when children came to us with tattle-taling or with some gossip or a rumor or something they didn't understand fully, we would say, "Go and investigate and come back." And the children remember that, because they had to really reflect on it and do a little bit of research and then formulate an opinion or an idea, and then come back. So I just want to end by saying--can I end now?

DC: Mm-hmm.

EH: I want to end by saying that I recently had the great, good fortune of being amongst the mothers and fathers, 25 families in Oakland, who the Oscar Grant Foundation had brought to Oakland because they are doing all kinds of work to end police violence and the killing of young black and brown men and women. [1:45:00] And the great, good fortune part is that I had the opportunity to sit with mothers and fathers who asked that we, during their conference, we just talk about ways to heal. So I got invited by Oscar's uncle Bobby, who everybody knows--everybody knows Uncle Bobby if you live in Oakland--and Oscar's mother. They brought all these people from all over the country, Tamir Rice's mom, Michael Brown's mom, Sandra Bland's mom, the mother and the family of Eric Garner, and there were people--there were families there that didn't make the news. You see, we think that police violence happens because

we know about it. It's always been happening, and--thank goodness for social media--we can know about it more quickly. And I was there with the first woman who joined the Black Panther Party, Tarika Lewis, who was on my list, by the way. And we were awestruck and felt privileged to be there, because these women and men were standing and saying, "Once I could get out of bed in the morning, I knew I had to do something." They would say things like, "I saw my son killed right in front of me. He wasn't a criminal. He had a mental illness, and he was acting in a way that people do when they're not on their medication in my house. The police--" keep going? "The police killed him in front of me in my house."

I couldn't do anything the rest of the day. I was supposed to go somewhere and speak, supposed to hang out with friends. I came home. But I will tell you, each of those families took two minutes to tell the story of what had happened, and we all just gave them love and encouragement, and some of them are moving out of depression. Some of them are still battling depression for obvious reasons, and some of them are so angry they can't cry. So there was one mom who was angry like that, and at the end of that session she began to weep, and I felt like that was a healing environment for her and for everyone. She was just sort of the tell for it.

So I want to say that there is a way to stop police violence. Retrain them or send them home. It sounds simple, but a lot of things that we make very complex in our minds are simple. All humans are trainable to a certain degree, and also I think that, beyond the police, we've given them the ability to behave in that way. All of us have to speak up. I noticed that the people in the room that day with those families--it was at a church in Oakland, downtown Oakland, nothing fancy--the people who showed up were people of

color who are ready to support, and there were white people in the room who had come to listen. If we can--even with the Library of Congress exhibits--if we can step out of listening to or just hearing or seeing something, if we each can step up right in our own lives, where we're located, in the skin we're in, with the people that we're with and the connections and the great experience, talents, and resources we have, we could change this, and that gives me hope, thinking about that, because I see it every day. But sometimes, we think it's not our problem, whatever that means, and it is, because, as a friend of mine said, the violence against young people of color is a [1:50:00] national hemorrhage, and it is. It is.

So that's how I want to end this. I do what I can do. I wish I could do more, but I'm only in one body, and my friends do as much as they can do. And I've aligned myself with Black Lives Matter networks and movement because I feel that young women of color, queer as well, are really turning the tide so it isn't older or elder people like my generation and the one above it who are telling young people what to do. They have agency, and they are speaking, and they're using social media to educate people, so I want to encourage my generation, the generation below me, and the one above me to spend more time being generous rather than critiquing. And I'm not speaking just to black people. My encouragement is to drop your head to your heart. And a question was asked that day in that room with the 25 families: what if this, people who have gathered today--what if what happened to Tamir Rice had happened to your son? And there were tears in the eyes of the dads, the white dads and the white moms. They hadn't gotten it before that moment in that room. This could be anybody's son or daughter. It's not, but if we thought of all the children as our very own it would be different. So thank you for

the interview, and I hope that the people who see this and all the other interviews are--feel encouraged, not forced, but encouraged to step forward in the world that we live in and to mentor and support the young people who carry all of this forward.

DC: Thank you.

EH: Thank you.

F1: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

END OF INTERVIEW